

THE APOSTLES BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

BIBLE TEXT : Acts 5:17-42.

LESSON 285 Junior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake" (Matthew 5:11).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Acts 5:17-42 ¹⁷ Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation,

¹⁸ And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison.

¹⁹ But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said,

²⁰ Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.

²¹ And when they heard *that*, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught. But the high priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought.

²² But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told,

²³ Saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors: but when we had opened, we found no man within.

²⁴ Now when the high priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they doubted of them whereunto this would grow.

²⁵ Then came one and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people.

²⁶ Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence: for they feared the

BIBLE REFERENCES:

NOTES:

Opposition

When multitudes were added to Christ's followers, and His Apostles wrought signs, wonders, and miracles, they had opposition. No doubt, because of jealousy, the Apostles were hated by those who persecuted them. The high priest, and the so-called religious people, known as Sadducees, who denied the resurrection of the dead, were filled with anger and wrath against the Apostles. They determined to put a stop to the work of Jesus' Apostles, and shut them up in prison. There was no charge against the Apostles, but for a short time it did hinder them from working as they had been. Perhaps the Sadducees had planned to put fear in the hearts of Christ's followers, and by imprisoning them had hoped to bring disgrace upon them and their work.

Once before, the same people had threatened the Apostles, and caused them to be questioned by the council. When the Apostles were forbidden to speak or to teach in the name of Jesus, they answered, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." The council could find no reason to punish the Apostles, and because of the people they were released. The Apostles were not frightened by threatening words, so they continued to preach and to teach about Jesus.

True to God

Under similar circumstances some people would stop preaching for a while. As long as there is opposition, some people hesitate to do what they know is right. God's people are not afraid of opposition and threatenings. Their desire is to do what they know is right. A child who loves the Lord and who is saved will take his stand to do that, which is right even though all the other children at play or at school choose to do otherwise. Just as the Lord helped His Apostles, He will honour and help those today who do what is right even though they are teased, laughed at, and persecuted severely.

In the Bible are other interesting examples of people who stood true to God during times of oppression and persecution. Daniel was threatened if he prayed, but he continued to pray and God was with him to deliver him from the lions' den (**Daniel 6:22-23** ²² **My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions' mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done no hurt.** ²³ **Then was the king exceeding glad for him, and commanded that they should take Daniel up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God**). Another time, when the wall was being built around Jerusalem, Sanballat and

people, lest they should have been stoned.

²⁷ And when they had brought them, they set *them* before the council: and the high priest asked them,

²⁸ Saying, Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name? and, behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us.

²⁹ Then Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.

³¹ Him hath God exalted with his right hand *to be* a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.

³² And we are his witnesses of these things; and *so is* also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

³³ When they heard *that*, they were cut *to the heart*, and took counsel to slay them.

³⁴ Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space;

³⁵ And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men.

³⁶ For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought.

³⁷ After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after

Tobiah tried in many ways to hinder Nehemiah, the leader. Nehemiah was not afraid of their armies, their prophecies, and their mischief. He continued the work of the Lord. When the wall was finished and the enemies heard about it, "they perceived that this work was wrought of our God" (Nehemiah 6:16).

Deliverance by an Angel

The Apostles had been faithful and obedient to God. They had been preaching and teaching until their enemies rose up against them, and then the Apostles were imprisoned. In their time of need, God did not forsake them. At night when all was still and dark in the prison, there was a visitor. The angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, led the Apostles out, and gave them a message. The angel said, "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life." Their commission was renewed. It was the same as it had been before. Their instructions were very plain. They were not to preach in a different place, nor in private only. They were to preach to the people, and their message was the same as they had been preaching – the words of life, the words which bring eternal life, the words of salvation. They were to preach the whole truth of the Gospel.

The angel of the Lord delivered the Apostles for a purpose – for the glory and honour of God. They were to do the work of the Lord. When God delivers a person from sin, it is for a purpose – that his life will give honour to God. When we are recovered from sickness or released from trouble by the power of God, we should give glory and honour to God by our lives and our service to Him. When you ask God for help or for deliverance in the time of trouble, remember to pray that the Lord will do it for His honour and glory, not for your pleasure or comfort only, but that you will be a witness to the power of God. We read in the Psalms: "Let my soul live, and it shall praise thee" (Psalm 119:175); and, "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may praise thy name" (Psalm 142:7).

An Empty Prison

The next day the Apostles went on with their work, without hesitation or argument. They knew what was expected of them, and they were satisfied to trust God. The persecution went on, too. The high priest gathered the council and all the senate together. As they were assembled there, the officers were sent to bring the prisoners. They found that the prison was locked securely and the guards were on duty, but there was no one inside. They reported to the council that the prison was empty. The people who had tried to bring disappointment and shame upon Christ's followers were the ones who were shamed, disappointed, and confused. While the council was wondering what to do next, they were told that the men whom they had put in prison were in the Temple teaching the people. To the confusion of their enemies, the Apostles dared to continue their teaching and preaching in the Temple, defying the people who had threatened them.

Fear God or Man

The Apostles were seized again. The officers took them without violence because they were afraid of the people. They

him: he also perished; and all, *even* as many as obeyed him, were dispersed.

³⁸ And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought:

³⁹ But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.

⁴⁰ And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten *them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

⁴¹ And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.

⁴² And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.

had no fear of displeasing God but they were very careful not to stir up the people. The Bible teaches that we should fear God rather than fear what man can do to us (**Luke 12:4-5** ⁴ **And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do.** ⁵ **But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him**). We read that "the fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe" (Proverbs 29:25) and that we should "fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

The Words of the High Priest

The Apostles stood before the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of the Jewish people. The high priest said, "Did not we straitly command you that ye should not teach in this name?" To this the Apostles answered, "We ought to obey God rather than men."

The Apostles were obedient to God whose authority is greater than that of men. They had been disobedient to the command of the officials because it was opposed to the commandment that the Lord had given them. A Christian is a good citizen and keeps the laws of the land. The laws of our country should not be broken unless they are contrary to the law of God. Our first duty is to obey God. The Apostles should have been justified by being obedient to the Lord.

The high priest avoided using the name of Jesus who was their Messiah and whose name could have been and should have been very dear to him. No doubt the high priest had memories of the day of Jesus' crucifixion when the Jewish people had cried out to Pilate, the Roman governor, "His blood be on us, and on our children" (Matthew 27:25). The Apostles were not trying to put the Blood of Jesus and the responsibility of His death upon the people. It was their own doing and fault that the Blood of Jesus was upon them and upon their children. The officials did not want to be charged with the evil that they had done, and hoped to blame the Apostles. The council must have been condemned by their own conscience. They would not have so spoken if Jesus had deserved to die, but their words showed that they knew that He was innocent.

Before the Council

As the Apostles stood before all those men of authority, perhaps the words of Jesus came to their minds. Jesus had said: "When they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: for the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say" (Luke 12:11, 12).

If the Sanhedrin had expected only a meek answer from the Apostles they must have been surprised, for with boldness Peter and the others spoke up, declaring that God had honoured and exalted Jesus to be a Prince and a Saviour. Peter continued by saying that Jesus was appointed by God to bring repentance to Israel and to forgive their sins. He preached the Gospel that

repentance will bring forgiveness. Peter did not make an excuse nor ask forgiveness for the actions of the Apostles. Instead, he repeated the charge that those to whom he spoke were the ones who had been responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus, and that by dishonouring and disobeying the name of Jesus they were dishonouring God.

Cut to the Heart

Peter's true report as a witness did not clear the Apostles before the Sanhedrin. The men of the council, being "cut to the heart" with anger and condemnation, planned to kill the Apostles.

There was another time, when Peter had preached such a sermon, that those who listened were "pricked in their heart" and felt their need of salvation (**Acts 2:37** ³⁷ *Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?*). That day there were 3000 who believed, repented, and were baptized. The preaching of the Gospel meant spiritual life to those who believed; but to the Sanhedrin, who rejected the Gospel, it meant spiritual death (**2 Corinthians 2:15-16** ¹⁵ *For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: ¹⁶ To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things?*).

Gamaliel

At this time, when it appeared that the Apostles were about to be killed, one of the council gave some advice. He was a Pharisee, a doctor of the law named Gamaliel, who was well known and well liked by the people. He advised that the Apostles be released for a while, and he cautioned the council against what they intended to do to these men. Gamaliel gave two examples of other people whose teachings had spread for a season and then disappeared without the help of the Sanhedrin.

Gamaliel was of the opinion that if the work of the Apostles was of men, it would "come to nought," but if it was the work of God they could not overthrow it. Gamaliel did not say what he believed about the work of the Apostles. What he did say showed that he knew that there is nothing greater than the power of God and that only the true work of the Lord will stand the test of time. (**Psalm 127:1** ¹ *Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. Proverbs 21:30 ³⁰ *There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD*) There have been many doctrines and creeds, which, through the years, have been divided, or added to, or completely done away with, but "the word of the Lord endureth for ever" (I Peter 1:25).*

Suffering for the Lord

The council agreed to carry out Gamaliel's advice to wait to see what would happen to the Apostles and their teaching. The council did not kill any of the Apostles at this time. Before they were released they were beaten, and told to speak no more in the name of Jesus. No doubt, by beating the Apostles, the Jewish officials had hoped to make them ashamed and fearful. But the persecution had a different effect upon the Apostles. They bore

the suffering with cheerfulness. They rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to suffer for Jesus. The Apostles went on with their work as God had commanded them. They did not slacken their work. They taught daily in the Temple just as Jesus had done shortly before His death (**Luke 19:47** ⁴⁷ **And he taught daily in the temple. But the chief priests and the scribes and the chief of the people sought to destroy him, Matthew 26:55** ⁵⁵ **In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes, Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me.**). They preached both in public and in private – in the Temple and in every house. They did not change the subject of their message. They still preached about Jesus and His power to save.

The council had not gained its point nor had it profited anything in its opposition to the preaching of the Gospel. The Apostles rejoiced in their suffering. No doubt, they were more determined than ever to be faithful to God. Undoubtedly they were joined closer in the bond of love, and continued to spread the Gospel. Persecution to Christ's followers gave them an opportunity to speak before the Sanhedrin so that some listened to the Gospel who had not done so before. Those who persecuted the Apostles were the real sufferers, because they rejected the Gospel; but the Apostles rejoiced as they spread the Good News of Salvation.

Many followers of Christ, since that time, have been persecuted, and even today some will be and are persecuted. "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (II Timothy 3:12), but there is a reward for them. Jesus said: "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for **great is your reward in heaven:** for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you" (Matthew 5:11, 12). Paul, an Apostle who suffered much persecution and many other things for the sake of Christ and the Gospel, said, "If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us" (II Timothy 2:12).

QUESTIONS

1. Why were the Apostles imprisoned?
2. Who opened the prison doors and led the Apostles out?
3. What was the message of the angel of the Lord?
4. Where did the officers find the Apostles?
5. What did the Apostles do when they were questioned by the council?
6. What was Gamaliel's advice?
7. Why were the Apostles beaten?
8. Why did the Apostles rejoice?
9. What is persecution?
10. What can we do if we are persecuted?